`COMING TO GRIPS WITH CONFLICT'

A (MAINLY AFRICAN-BASED) CONCEPTUAL GUIDE

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26 SEPTEMBER, 1996

Purpose of the Paper

'Conflict' is a subject matter fraught with conceptual and empirical challenges, as well as with potentially tragic realities. Most immediately, the term's imprecision means that its utility may be severely restricted without more specific conceptualization and sub-definition.

This short paper explores some concepts related to this general theme in an attempt to provide such preliminary clarification. It also briefly summarizes several discussions in the academic literature on conflict in Africa. It does not explore the causes of or possible intervention-responses to crises caused by natural or other non-political factors, even if such catastrophes may, in themselves, contain conflicts of their own (with whatever `politics' may be involved in such situations).

General Aspects of Conflict: What Does The Term Mean?

To begin with, conflict may be violent, or not. Indeed, it is often the case that non-violent conflict, possibly involving high stakes and emotionally-charged contestants, acts as a substitute for actual fighting. One should also remember that many forms of `violence' need not involve conflict, where the victims of oppression are not in a position to resist or fight back. These may include political (or ordinary) prisoners, as well as members of the public generally who suffer at the hands of those in possession of the state's coercive instruments. (There may be other actors involved here besides the state, of course.)

Likewise, in certain circumstances, such bloodless (or even controlled, if somewhat bloody) conflict may take on a kind of patterned or even ritual character, again serving to reduce the likelihood of more spontaneous, non-institutionalized conflict that is more likely to be violent and, when so, on a much greater scale.

More generally, certain forms and incidents of conflict which give rise to reconfigurations in the landscape of economic and political power may, in the longer term, serve to relieve pressures and thereby reduce or eliminate the risk of more severe, long-term, violent conflict which may otherwise be likely to occur. It is, therefore, a subject matter of extreme complexity and high uncertainty, particularly when the aim of our understanding is active intervention to prevent, mitigate or resolve those conflicts which appear most immediate.

In order to appreciate this complexity, one might begin by disaggregating and analyzing the general phenomenon according to various sub-categories in terms of these initial variables:

1. underlying causes
2. immediate goals of contestants
3. identity/number of (actual or potential) participants
4. means/instruments at the disposal of combatants and those actually employed
5a. level of intensity/cost to participants, local bystanders, society as a whole, and others further afield
5b. proximity to major urban center(s/key areas of economic activity
6. results/impact (for both participants and others, and for the wider physical environment as well as human populations)

Clearly, simply assembling the data regarding particular conflicts in these terms can be a daunting task.

Categories of Political Conflict: Actors, Arenas and Goals

Next, with regard to the parties/contexts of conflict (whether violent or not, but here, probably the latter), we could distinguish the following:

1. conflict for control of the state leading to possible or actual state disintegration (also a possible result of foreign intervention which destroys a state structure but does not replace it);

2. conflict over control of the state when the state is and remains very much intact;

3. conflict in which the state is the main protagonist, when, for example, it is attempting to impose its will on society; this could be a region, political class, ethnic or religious group, or other entity, but the defining factor is that the state itself is a party, and those occupying it are using its coercive instruments to bolster its grip over society;

4. conflict between societal elements themselves with the state as a neutral bystander, partisan but uninvolved observer, or would-be peace-maker.

Any of the above conflicts could embody:

a. the competition for some specific resource(s), whether material or symbolic, and/or:

b. the expression of hatred based on communal and/or other cleavage(s) but with no material goal in mind.

They could also be planned, long-term campaigns led by a specific, well organized leadership, or more spontaneous and leaderless outbursts.

Calvert has noted two broad categories of overt (and probably violent) conflict: (a) revolutionary and (b) sub-revolutionary, with the latter consisting of any or all of the following in terms of its concrete manifestations:

- demonstrations and strikes
- riots, whether organized or spontaneous
- terrorism

Its key characteristic is that whatever level of violence may occur (as in the US urban riots of the 1960s, and so far, in the killings in Northern Ireland or in the Basque region of Spain), fundamental political change lies beyond its reach (1983:162-64).

Within the former, revolutionary, category, there are conflicts leading to overthrow of the ruling elite which may or may not also involve large scale socio-economic transformation. Generally (but not always), such transformations require greater levels of violence to effect them.

They can also generally be linked to structural contradictions in society, as between, for example, feudalism and capitalism as opposing modes of production, or more mundanely, between property-owning and property-less classes. In such cases, they need not depend upon cultural, ethnic, or religious differences which may arise within a given type of economic system, and which may certainly be as violent in their manifestation, though leading to no such fundamental transformation. (And here it should be noted that even very violent and well organized revolutionary efforts do not always succeed.)

A. Issues

Conflicts, especially those of a violent nature, inevitably raise basic questions about the political community. Many could be asked, reflecting all of the various factors mentioned above. Certain core questions about the appearance and impact of violent conflict might include the following:

a. When is it a result of the failure of corruption to bridge distant socio-economic categories?

b. When is it part of the transition to more genuinely competitive politics, or a generally less conflictual society?

c. When does it give rise to (or inhibit) a more active/direct political role of the military?

d. When does it result primarily from foreign/international influence/pressure/involvement rather than from local forces?

e. When, regardless of its origin, is it likely to acquire international as well as simply national dimensions?

f. When can it be expected to continue unabated barring outside intervention or mediation?

B. Key Variables

In terms of wider social, political and economic impact, the key determinants of impact

would seem to include the following:

1. the type and abundance of weapons and other conflict-usable resources at the disposal of combatants;

2. the proximity of the conflict area(s) to major urban center(s);

3. the level of disruption of economic activity/capacity of the population to feed itself/survive;

4. the numbers of actual/potential combatants involved;

5. the will of public authority (and/or the international community) to intervene so as to prevent, control or stop the conflict.

Violence-Igniting Situations

Given the many varieties of conflict, as well as the settings in which they occur, it is impossible to generalize about when and where violence is most likely to erupt. Even within a specific conflict category, the great number of variables at work would often make prediction little more than guess-work, especially because the category of `violence' itself has so many particular variations.

Nevertheless, there are certain general conditions which have tended to foster such outbreaks which might serve here as hypotheses for particular situations. Political violence, then, could be said to be more likely to occur where:

1. a regime or an important element of a regime feels seriously threatened (for whatever reason) and calculates that without employing force against an opposing group (either within the regime or outside) it may well lose power, access to some critical resource, or worse;

2. a section of society has sought to protect its material or moral integrity without success, and concludes only through more dramatic action can it possibly bring to bear enough

pressure to be heard;

3. hopes for improvement in a situation (economic or political) have been dashed (for example, hopes for political mobility following economic gains, or hopes for the implementation of an agreed if highly contentious compromise between antagonistic groups) leading to widescale disillusionment and frustration;

4. a leading personality, hero, or symbolic representive of a particular group or movement is killed, taken into custody, or otherwise victimized, leading to a more spontaneous outburst of grief and anger;

5. conditions are so desperate and the perceived rewards of a successful onslaught against those in power or controlling other resources are so attractive, that violent confrontation, however uncertain of success, is worth a try;

6. the honor or reputation of a group or community has been so tarnished or threatened that only a violent reply is viewed as a means of repairing it, regardless of the probable outcome in win-lose terms;

7. a stable stand-off between contending groups based on some sort of balance-of-power is destabilized by the introduction of new resources available to one side only, or by the loss of significant resources by one side only (which could include external support, finances, superior or additional weapons, and so on), making aggressive action attractive to the newly-advantaged party.

Undoubtedly, additional `tinder-box' contexts could be added to this list, as could sets of circumstances leading to particular outcomes of conflicts between contesting parties.

Types of Conflict in Africa

Turning more specifically to conflict in Africa, Zartman has identified six basic historically specific categories (1985:12-16).

The first is that of decolonization power struggles, when combinations of violent and non-violent means had to be taken up in the quest for independence. Notwithstanding some major exceptions (Kenya, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, etc.), the transition to independence was, in

general, remarkably peaceful, reflecting the shift of focus in metropolitan domination from political to economic control.

The second category takes in immediate post-colonial efforts of new regimes to achieve consolidation, if not complete national integration. These were efforts to bring to heel regional, ethnic, ideological or personal forces which resisted state authority. For the losers, at least their leaders, exile was often the only survival option (1985:12).

Zartman's third category of conflict is that of "liberation movements" (1985:13), including such efforts as that of UNITA in Angola, of Polisario in Morocco, and the FLNC in Zaire.

The fourth category concerns conflicts over ill-defined territory. These examples of more formal, international strife over borders or specific (usually very small) pieces of land are seen in the following cases: between Burkina Faso and Niger, between Ghana and Togo, Libya and Chad, and Uganda (under Amin) and Tanzania.

The fifth category involves those conflicts which arise from "structural rivalries", in which certain African states, having achieved a certain degree of consolidation of power, attempt to extend their influence outward in regional terms, and even beyond (1985:14-15). Examples here are the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, and, in less bi-polar fashion, the efforts of such states as Nigeria, Sudan, and South Africa (both pre and post-apartheid). Such outward aspirations need not lead to conflict of a violent nature, but do, nevertheless, engender tensions based on evolving, if still nascent, differences of `national interest'.

Zartman's final category of conflict is that which stems from the impact of foreign interests, specifically with regard to the expanded capacity of military forces in Africa. Writing when he was, he linked these primarily to Cold War rivalry. This raises the issue of whether, and

on what terms, external forces (old or new) retain (or will acquire) the capacity and interest to augment such forces in the present and future.

An alternative treatment of the sources and types of conflict in Africa is that of Chazan et al (1992). They have noted that since independence, "the focus of conflict...has gradually shifted from disputes over political boundaries to disagreements over political values."

Beyond this, however, they contrast five types of conflict in terms of the principal organizing actors and the degree of vertical linkages to deeper reaches of society. These are:

1 - elite conflicts
2 - factional conflicts
3 - communal conflicts
4 - mass conflicts
5 - popular conflicts

Because the authors' primary concerns are (a) the extent to which particular types of conflict threaten the integrity of the state and (b) the connection between such conflict types and particular general sets of societal characteristics related to economic differentiation, ethnic pluralism, forms of political organization, and so on, they are not so interested in the more immediate situations which actually ignite violence, or in measures which might be taken to predict, prevent, mitigate or terminate them. Likewise, their focus is almost entirely on national rather than international factors. Given the general absence of formal warfare in Africa at this latter level, such focus is not misplaced. Nevertheless, there are many cases of non-state violence which do cross borders, so that this category of violence should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, for analytical purposes, the distinctions they make at the national level are useful.

1. Elite Conflicts

Elite conflicts rarely become broadly violent, even if individual assassinations may occur.

They also rarely threaten the established political order, since they take place basically among the "haves" who have a vested interest in preserving the status quo. Much of this type of conflict, therefore, is relatively restrained, occurs out of open view, and has little outward linkage to either the urban poor or rural masses. It is possible, however, that in situations of natural or political disasters (famines, heads of state assassinations, etc.) these might take on broader, deeper forms, as they may also in the face of general economic mismanagement, especially where there is a vibrant, self-confident business class. Generally, however, such conflicts are highly personalized and fluid, reducing the likelihood of their escalation.

2. Factional Conflicts

Factional conflicts are those which, though based upon and organized by elites, extend outward into society as followers/supporters are recruited and rewarded for the basic benefit of their patrons. Such conflicts are said to abound "in those pluralist and administrative-hegemonic regimes where either intermediate social organizations have flourished and/or where elaborate patronage networks have thrived" (1992:193). These are also generally more common in those countries where party political competition was especially intense during the transition to independence.

Such conflicts occur primarily over the narrow question of access to power, but in divided, plural societies, they can feed into ethno-regional conflict where such disparities are significant, and where consciousness about relative advantage and disadvantage increases. Class appeals as a basis for mobilization may also occur, but these embody some danger, since faction leaders are inevitably part of the better-off segment of society. The key point, however, is that as long as economic growth is taking place, there will be an adequate supply of resources to feed into this type of political competition; when it begins to shrink (or even when its per capita rate of increase declines) tensions, between both elite rivals and their mass supporters - may surpass the ability of existing social and political structures to contain them. In such circumstances, the

simple demand for access to spoils may evolve into pressures for a change of government, or (especially if such demands are frustrated) simply lead to an increase in criminal activity, whether more or less devoid of any specific political content.

For its part, those commanding the state apparatus may employ any of the following by way of response: (1) incorporating the most vocal opposition critics into their ranks; (2) widening popular participation through political reform; and (3) cracking down on their main protagonists. This latter option may involve the mere exercise of repressive instruments, or take the more drastic form of a military coup which replaces the civilian authority. With regard to the particular type of political regime, relevant here is Janowitz's reminder that:

> The "takeover" of power by the military in new nations has generally followed the collapse of efforts to create democratic-type institutions; the military has tended not to displace the single mass-party civilian regimes [1970:145].

Finally, it is noted that such strife often reaches its peak during election time, when "gains are assessed, scores settled, and alliances reformed" (1992:195). Longer term, while the replacement of one elite group by another may often enhance overall system stability by facilitating a rotation of access to state spoils, frequent regime changes in the context of falling standards of living may easily degenerate into more serious and violent struggles for power.

3. Communal Conflicts

Communal conflicts, by their very nature, pose more danger to overall stability by penetrating deeper into the fabric of society. In this sense, they may challenge not only a ruling elite, but state power itself. Even if very few secession movements have developed in Africa (including Katanga in the Congo, Biafra in Nigeria, and that of southern Sudan), and only one has led to the creation of a new state (Eritrea), these conflicts may still be of considerable threat

to order, and involve much suffering and material destruction. Some of the major ones have been/are: Liberia, Angola, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Chad, Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Uganda.

Two ethnic configurations have characterized most of these conflicts: (1) the existence of several large, geographically specific groups, or; (2) a dominant group and a highly cohesive, culturally distinct minority, usually more socio-economically advanced that the former (such as the Ibo in Biafra/Nigeria, the Arabs in Zanzibar, the Tutsi in Rwanda, and so on).

Most communal conflicts in Africa have been ethnic in nature, but these have often been fueled by religious differences as well. How quickly such conflicts are subdued depends upon the internal coherence of the state, especially its military, and the degree of regional isolation and self-sufficiency of the aggrieved community. External support can also play a major role in inaugurating and sustaining them, though in fact such support, when it has come, has generally been directed to the existing government in its effort to quell such disruptions. Due to the great sensitivity of nearly all African states regarding territorial integrity, such antipathy towards centrifugal disintegration is not surprising (cf the OAU Charter). Only in Ethiopia (where Eritrea won independence) and in Angola (where UNITA forced a negotiated settlement) did a government achieve less than total defeat of the insurrection, even if those in Chad and Sudan continue, if sporadically.

Chazan et al cite three patterns in the course of these communal conflicts: (1) escalation and eventual military resolution (northeast Kenya in the early 1960s and Biafra; (2) protracted, vacillating conflict (Chad and Sudan); and (3) the actual capture of the state by ethnic-based insurgents (Liberia, Ethiopia, and Somalia in 1991, before the state's collapse).

The authors likewise point to several strategies employed by African regimes to prevent or mitigate such conflicts: (1) the adoption of some form of federalism with greater or lesser degrees of regional and/or communal administrative autonomy; (2) the use of the state to foster

national integration through education and indoctrination (including national language policy), making use of values and cultural symbols to achieve this; and (3) communal balancing through some form of proportional representation in both the main political institutions and the higher reaches of the economy over which the state has some control, often referred to as "ethnic arithmetic." Here it is noted that while "this method of dealing with ethnic friction has not...been particularly successful", it is also true that "[i]gnoring ethnic divisions has not helped them to disappear" (1992:202). Finally, all in all, African leaders have been quite successful in containing such forces, even if they often lie not too far below the surface of everyday life, especially where feelings of relative deprivation coincide with more general economic decline.

4. Mass Conflicts

The most striking fact regarding mass conflicts in Africa is that they have been so rare. It must be stressed here, however, that the term "mass" refers not to the numbers of people involved in any particular uprising or series of violent encounters, but rather, to those violent eruptions which constitute contests between those who would effect a rapid, complete and permanent alteration of the structure of power in society, and those who seek to preserve the status quo. Since structures of power are built on economic relations, such conflicts are generally of a class character (as in Ethiopia in 1974), or of an anti-colonial nature (Angola, Mozambique, etc.). The lower-level wars of internal liberation in Rhodesia and South Africa (and during the colonial period, in Kenya), had an ingredient of such elements, but due to the arrival of independence under African rule through political negotiation, never achieved their full fruition.

Indeed, the study of conflict in Africa must grapple with the reasons why examples (so far) of this type of uprising are so few and far between. Here, such factors as (1) the general absence in Africa's historical legacy of a dichotomy between landed aristocracies and landless peasantries directly dependent upon them; (2) the multi-class character of much of the upwardly-mobile population; (3) neo-colonial economic relations which, by draining wealth, have stunted

the development of national class cleavages, especially that between capital and labor, since unemployment rates are so high (making trade unions very weak), and more highly-skilled workers are often considered as belonging to the privileged elite; (4) the relative isolation of urban, intellectual elements from rural masses; (5) ethnic heterogeneity, coupled with a consciousness that often tends to perceive opportunity and misfortune in ethno-regional, rather than class terms; and (6) the general absence of international warfare with its concomitant encouragement to nationalism, but which can undermine the credibility of a particular regime in the wake of military defeat, have all served to militate against the appearance of conflicts of this type. Nevertheless, the growing chasm between `haves' and `have-nots' has laid the basis for a certain number of eruptions, as was the case in Ghana and Burkina-Faso, for example. But often such lashing out aims to (or results in) not the genuine transformation of society, but rather the simple replacement of one set of opportunistic elite rulers by another. In general, however, `mass rumblings' rather than revolutionizing conflicts have been the rule. Yet, looking to the future, Chazan et al point to a hidden potential here:

> ...[T]he possibility of revolutionary change may be greater in the stronger states on the continent (Nigeria, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire), where center consolidation has taken place and class distinctions have begun to appear as a consequence of factional disputes [1992:204].

5. Popular Conflicts

This final form of conflict differs from the previous four in one crucial way:

> ...[I]t need not be directly concerned with gaining access to the center (elite or factional disputes) or with changing the political center or altering its forms (communal and mass conflicts) but is often concerned with creating a distance between the formal [state] domain and individual citizens, local communities, and specific social groups [Chazan et al, 1992:205].

Such responses thus reflect a desire to minimize vulnerability to government interference and control, aiming to create some realm of autonomy against the intruding forces of officialdom, distant markets, or `modernization' in general.

Such confrontations have emerged in situations where patron-client linkages have broken down, or where particular groups in society, such as women, have been systematically excluded from whatever benefits officially-recognized membership in society offers. Such failure of state structures to incorporate is more commonly found among rural groups, who may suffer the intrusion of state power without sharing in its benefits, or where the provision of such benefits through `development' is seen to threaten community identity. Due to the lack of effective power, such protest often takes the form of religious cults and other cultural revivalist movements based on indigenous structures, rituals, and beliefs. Songs, other art forms, jokes and secret languages and expressions may be other manifestations of this propensity to disengage.

Some such activities take on a more overt political dimension than others. For example, the imposition of harsh structural `reforms' has, on occasion, produced a backlash of public protest, as in Zambia during 1986-7, accompanied by violence.

Often, however, the primary outlet is economic activity which is itself often of a violent nature. This is so because, by its nature, such defensive, retreatist behavior is often illegal, violating state rules if not actually threatening them. Gang-type warfare for the control of contraband trade or legitimate cross-border marketing opportunities (Davidson, 1992:213), or (more usually hit-squad type) assassinations and other attacks on individuals, usually related to intra-group competition, are all part of this more disorganized form of protest. So, too, is even less organized violence, where simple robbery and theft, not of a large-scale, well-organized basis, reflects the motivation of individuals and small bands acting on their own, rather than large groups. Given the `right' environment, these actions can, nevertheless, take on considerable

proportions in the cumulative sense.

Due to their often peripheral, self-protective, often `hidden' or underground nature, African states have not found it easy to control let alone stamp out such popular expressions. Because of their very non-directly confrontational and often acephalous nature, co-opting such rejectionist groups by buying-off their leaders is rarely feasible. Some governments, therefore, have sought to ignore such protests as much as possible, admitting their inability to terminate them. Others have resorted to heightened levels of autocratic brutality, especially where such hostile withdrawal threatens to rob the state of access to important economic resources (such as the recent Nigerian executions of the Agoni environmentalist-protestors, fighting against the exploitation of their land by foreign petroleum interests).

Notwithstanding the general non-political vocabulary of such protest, however, the implications for politics are profound. At one level, such popular protest:

> ...has underscored disintegration and autocratic trends in many African political environments. When taken together, acts of popular confrontation may reveal the outlines of a hidden deep politics in situations where official political organization is not endowed with a vision based on an integrative set of values...[Chazan et al, 1992:207]

Of greater interest here is the authors' observation that with "the closure of exit options", as market relations expand and the state's capacity to penetrate communities increases, it remains unclear whether such popular protest will more concretely identify the state as a target, and in doing so, whether the result will be "a rehabilitation of existing authoritarian state structures or a broader process of democratization" (Ibid).

Looking out over these various forms taken together, it is apparent that the causes of political conflict in Africa are many, and arise in a mix of multifaceted and changing situations. Each country and regime type has "invited" its own varieties of conflict, reflecting a particular set

of factors. At the same time, these five types must not be seen as mutually exclusive, since several may exist simultaneously and even contribute to each other's vibrancy. Here, case studies are called for which reveal just when, and why, certain combinations, and not others, are found.

Moreover, even if political instability, civilian insurrection, military-sponsored violence (if not armed takeover), and other, not-so-overtly political forms of protest and even violence have plagued much of Africa, making political cohesion elusive, the authors stress that such conflict need not be politically dysfunctional, "just as fundamental political change does not have to be contingent on an organized opposition (1992:208).

Conclusion

It is impossible to generalize about conflict. Certain forms of violence, relating to economic and natural crises, may reach high levels of magnitude without threatening the state. Others, such as intra-elite strife at the heart of state structures, may engender fundamental changes in regime type or behavior patterns with only minimal popular involvement.

In both developing theoretical tools to explain or even predict conflicts, therefore, and going beyond academic exercise to the far more challenging task of devising strategies to prevent or mediate them, it behooves us to strive for precision in our concepts, and language. Doing so, in turn, should help us to ask more thoughtfully, understand more thoroughly, and act more wisely.

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